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BREAKING NEWS: *A British rescue team and a sophisticated mini-submarine have left the Norwegian port of Trondheim to join efforts to save 116 sailors trapped on Russian submarine the Kursk. Full story*

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'Massive blast' sank the Kursk

Underwater capsules trying to reach 116 seamen trapped on Russian submarine the Kursk have failed with their latest rescue mission.

The news comes as evidence suggests a huge explosion shattered large areas of the vessel, causing it to sink.

Film of the submarine shows massive damage reaching from the front to the conning tower that would have sent the vessel crashing to the bottom in seconds, navy officials say.

The control room where most of the crew work is below the tower, suggesting many sailors had no time to escape when the submarine went down.

The Russian navy has refused to confirm the reports, but officers have said an explosion in the torpedo compartment at the front of the submarine caused the Kursk to sink.

A likely scenario is that one torpedo exploded, setting off a much bigger explosion in the compartment which is packed with torpedoes.

Navy officials say they can detect no signs of life on the Kursk, but some of the crew could still be alive.

Rescue capsules trying to link up with the submarine for the past three days have again been driven back by racing currents and swirling sand at the bottom of the Barents Sea.



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Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov says the situation is "close to catastrophic," according to Russian news reports.

British and Norwegian rescue teams heading for the scene by ship are not expected to arrive until Saturday, raising fears that they would be too late.

The navy has given contradictory estimates of how long the Kursk's oxygen could last, but some officers say air generators may have been destroyed when the submarine hit the seabed last Saturday.

Last updated: 08:35 Thursday 17th August 2000.

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